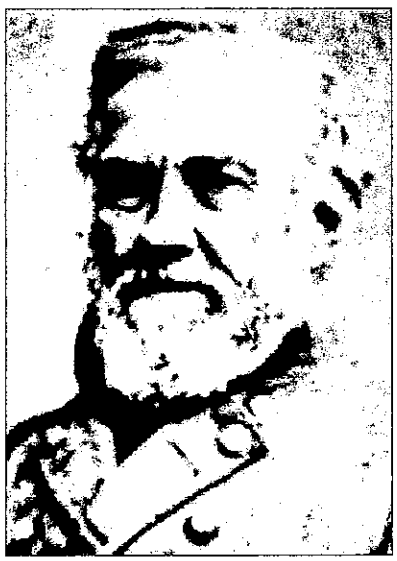
ARTILLERY

BRIGADIER GENERAL WILLIAM NELSON PENDLETON



Though he looked remarkably like Robert E. Lee with his white hair and beard, Pendleton had none of the Army of Northern Virginia commander's military prowess. In fact, Pendleton was one of the weakest links in the Southern army's chain of command.

A Richmond native, Pendleton graduated from West Point in 1830 and served in the U.S. artillery for three years. He spent much of this time, however, lying in hospitals with fever, nausea, and paralyzed limbs from an illness that may have been yellow fever. The ill gunner resigned his commission in 1833 to teach at Delaware College in Pennsylvania. Experiencing fits of depression and neurotic physical symptoms that tormented him throughout his life, he switched careers again in 1837 and became an Episcopal minister in order to heal his "depraved and unsanctified heart." He later assumed the rectorship at Grace Episcopal church in Lexington, Virginia.

Radical abolitionist John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry inspired a revival of the Southern militia system. Some of the local Lexington youths formed a battery in 1860 and asked the aging fifty-year old ex-artilleryman to instruct them in the science of gunnery. When the war began the next year, they named themselves the Rockbridge Artillery and elected Pendleton their captain on May 1. He accepted the command, then spent the rest of the day writing a memorandum to himself in which he attempted to rectify his military position with his sacred calling. In keeping with the religious theme of their battery, the artillerists nicknamed their four pieces "Matthew," "Mark," "Luke," and "John." From the beginning of the conflict, the Rockbridge Artillery was a conspicuous presence in the Confederate army, as a press hungry for picturesque heroes picked up Captain Pendleton's story. By early July, the reading public was already familiar with the warrior-minister who, so the story went, had loaded and aimed his gun at Federals in the Shenandoah Valley and then raised his hand in a blessing: "May the Lord have mercy on their misguided souls—fire!"

At First Manassas on July 21, 1861, Pendleton had his horse shot out from under him and was grazed by bullets in the ear and back. He received "great praise" from Brig. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, as well as a mention in Gen. Joe Johnston's report. He was promoted to colonel without delay and, being the first artillerist to distinguish himself, acted as Johnston's Chief of Artillery that fall—a position for which he was wholly unsuited. During this service Pendleton continued to preach, delivering sermons when not drilling, fitting, and organizing the army's artillery. In so doing, he kept himself in the public eye, and was soon rewarded for his efforts: on

March 26, 1862, he was promoted to brigadier general.

Pendleton's deficiencies, however, showed up as soon as active campaigning resumed. While he had dedicated substantial thought to the theory and organization of artillery, he showed no aptitude for actually directing guns in action. At the Battle of Malvern Hill on July 1, Pendleton had charge of the Reserve Artillery, more than fourteen batteries totaling about ninety guns. The Confederate infantry desperately need artillery support during that engagement, yet Pendleton never managed to reach army headquarters and employed only one of his fourteen batteries. He began to be held in contempt by many of his junior officers. One remarked on "the great superabundance of artillery and the scanty use that was made of it" during Malvern Hill, but General Lee was silent on this issue.

Pendleton's Reserve was next used when the army crossed the Potomac into Maryland in September 1862. The parson's moment in the campaign came after the Battle of Sharpsburg on September 17, when Lee counted on Pendleton and forty-four of his guns to guard the rear of the army as it limped across the Potomac River. Not long after midnight a panicked Pendleton wakened Lee in his tent. The Federals had suddenly thrown a corps across the Potomac, he gasped, driving off the cannoneers and their infantry supports; even worse, all the guns of the Confederate Reserve Artillery had been captured. "All?," said Lee with mounting concern. "Yes, General, I fear all," Pendleton ominously rejoined.

When Jackson heard the story, he put a division in motion at once and drove the Federals back across the river. In so doing, he found that an artillery major had actually withdrawn the "captured" fieldpieces the previous evening. Pendleton had been unaware of this, and had given them up for lost, and his prestige plummeted after this embarrassing affair. "Pendleton is Lee's weakness," one lieutenant wrote. "He is like the elephant, we have him and we don't know what on earth to do with him, and it costs a devil of a sight to feed him."

Pendleton's reputation rebounded somewhat with his competent reorganization of the Rebel "long arm" during the fall of 1862 and the first part of 1863. Any meager gains in this area, however, were forfeited by his performance at Chancellorsville in May. When called upon to help defend the Fredericksburg heights with his batteries against the Union Sixth Corps, he bungled the operation by sending most of his guns away prematurely; eight cannons were lost to the Federals before he withdrew. (Some observers said Pendleton retreated in a panic.) Lee carefully praised "the batteries under" Pendleton after the battle—but not the man himself. Hearing that Lee was dissatisfied with his handling of the artillery in the Chancellorsville battle, the Reverend became disconsolate.

In the reorganization of the Army of Northern Virginia after Chancellorsville, Pendleton lost his direct command of the Reserve Artillery. He reverted to his earlier status as General in Chief of Artillery, but the new arrangement was actually a demotion, for he now simply functioned as an advisor.

GETTYSBURG: Pendleton rode toward Gettysburg on the Chambersburg Pike on July 1, arriving at Cashtown and hearing the sound of guns to the east about the same time as Lee. When Lee rode rapidly toward the battlefield in the early afternoon, Pendleton stayed near him for instructions. When they reached the scene of the fighting on McPherson's Ridge, Lee sent Pendleton to the right with some artillery, but the Reverend declined to open fire without infantry support. He moved the guns forward to Seminary Ridge after the Federals had been sent flying back to Cemetery Hill late that afternoon, but failed to open fire on the new Union stronghold, not being aggressive enough to renew the battle on his own initiative (a problem pandemic among Confederate commanders that evening).

Pendleton's most significant contribution on July 2 was as a member of a scouting party that Lee dispatched to the Round Tops soon after sunrise. Although Pendleton probably rode no farther than Span-

plethora of remarkable performances by

gler's Woods, the rest of the riders continued to a point they later claimed was in the rear of the Round Tops. They later reported that Union troops were not stationed there at that time—a strange finding since several Federal organizations were in the area. Pendleton's report that an attack in that direction "might succeed" may have had some influence on Lee's decision to strike there that afternoon. Pendleton stayed on the right during the afternoon, but the artillery pieces engaged during Lt. Gen. James Longstreet's onslaught were handled by Col. Edward Porter Alexander, the able First Corps artillery chief; Pendleton had little chance to contribute.

Alexander was again employed to do the lion's share of the work preparing for Longstreet's assault on the Union center on July 3. Although Pendleton "reviewed" Alexander's work, he raised no objections to any of the gun emplacements. Pendleton was far too complacent in his judgments, for many of the guns were posted too far away from the enemy on Cemetery Ridge to strike the crushing blow needed to disorganize the enemy line. Pendleton did make one valuable contribution when he rounded up nine short-range howitzers from Lt. Gen. A.P. Hill's corps and collected them into a mobile battery that could be rushed forward to blast away at the enemy during the infantry assault. With the Rebel bombardment at hand, however, Alexander could not find them because Pendleton had reconsidered and withdrawn four of them, while another nervous officer had withdrawn the remaining five—both without informing Alexander. Pendleton created a bigger problem later when, at the height of the cannonade, he moved the ammunition wagons farther to the rear—again without informing the gunners. As a result, artillery fire slackened while gun crews frantically searched for ammunition. Since Alexander wrote one of the best accounts of the Battle of Gettysburg, these blunders by Pendleton became well entrenched in the lore of the engagement.

Despite his gross inabilities, Lee never removed the parson. He remained Chief of Artillery for the remainder of the war, though it became more and more an administrative and organizational position; Pendleton was seldom consulted when the armies clashed, although he performed good service on the final retreat to Appomattox.

After the war, Pendleton returned to Lexington and his Episcopal Church. He died in January 1883 and was buried there beside his only son, Sandie Pendleton, who had been killed during the war.

For further reading:

Alexander, Edward Porter, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of*, Gary Gallagher, ed. Chapel Hill, 1989.

Freeman, Douglas S. *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command.* vol. 3. New York, 1944.

Lee, Susan D. *Memoirs of William Nelson Pendleton, D. D.* Harrisonburg, 1991.

Wert, Jeffrey C. "'Old Artillery': William Nelson Pendleton." *Civil War Times Illustrated*, 13, June ,1974.